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Submitted via email: M3Junction9Improvements@highwaysengland.co.uk

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M3 Junction 9 Improvements Scheme Statutory Consultation – 27 May to 8 July 2021

Dear Ms Palmer,

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust strongly objects to the current proposals for the M3 Junction 9 improvements scheme. We consider that the current proposals for mitigation are inadequate to address the ecological damage caused by this scheme and the legacy of Highways England schemes before it.

Proposals for the expansion on the M3 Junction 9 follow significant commitments for nature's recovery by the Government (as set out in the Government's 25-year Environment Plan and draft Environment Bill). The Trust engaged positively with Highways England's previous stakeholder engagement, expecting a modern approach to development that prioritises the urgency of nature's recovery, as made clear by the Dasgupta Review and current government priorities. However, the lack of consideration for any of the stakeholder recommendations for mitigation and enhancement, including from the Trust, the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and Statutory Agencies, shows Highways England's blatant lack of regard and care for nature or proper consultation within this scheme.

The proposals represent a regressive approach to development. A continuation of a road-building philosophy that is unconcerned by the obligation to prevent harm and misses opportunities to make restitution for previous damages. This scheme forgoes any credible attempt to achieve the biodiversity net-gain that any responsible developer must put front and centre and represents a colossal failure of ambition and responsibility to achieve development that builds sympathetically with nature.



Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust has been actively involved in protecting and restoring wildlife and the landscape around Winchester for decades. We own and/or manage internationally and nationally important nature reserves totalling nearly 200 hectares within the locus of the Junction 9 project and the area is a strategic priority for the Trust. We have a large number of members and excellent relationships with the many partners in the area. We are therefore not only very interested in how the Junction 9 Scheme is unfolding but are increasingly concerned about both the level of ambition for the natural environment and the process of stakeholder consultation.

We object to the current proposals on the basis of insufficient biodiversity net gain and mitigation, especially when considering the historic severance of the landscape and ecological network due to previous development of the road network. We are also extremely concerned with the potentially severe impacts to our Winnall Moors nature reserve (SSSI, SAC) which we do not believe have been fully considered in the current proposals.

1. Lack of biodiversity net gain and sufficient mitigation

We are extremely concerned about the current mitigation plans for this scheme, which appears to be incredibly limited and damage control at best. The Mitigation Design Plan contains very little detail on the net gains expected and focuses mitigation on limited on-site improvements to land which they will impact during construction.

The lack of off-site mitigation is incredibly concerning as the immediate 'red-line' footprint of the scheme is very limited, so net gains must be realised in the wider zone of impact. We join others in saying that this project should not be viewed in isolation – it comes as part of a long-term programme of road developments in the M3 corridor which have caused huge ecological impacts and therefore must address historical issues such as severance of ecological connectivity. We would also like to see long term management plans, knowing that Highways Agency land at Bar End has been neglected for almost a decade, becoming unsuitable for the species it was designed to support after the building of the M3 through Twyford Down.

Overall, the scheme's approach to biodiversity net gain and mitigation lacks any ambition to make enhancements to the wildlife and nature recovery network locally. In addition, following the recent announcement by the Government that the Environment Bill will be amended to legislate for biodiversity net gain for new Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, it is the Trust's view that Highways England should be including within this Scheme proposals to achieve significant biodiversity net gain. We do not currently consider that these proposals currently meet the legally required 10% minimum net gain. We recommend that Highways England commit to a 20% biodiversity net gain, to lead the way in nature-positive transport development. We also encourage Highways England to clearly demonstrate how they could achieve that requirement, with stakeholder engagement.

The Trust, alongside other stakeholders have previously tabled suggestions for mitigation which we would like to see considered. We consider that the scope of mitigation and enhancement for the scheme appears to be greatly diminished against the proposals that the stakeholder group tabled.

We appreciated being included in round-table discussions about the Scheme at a relatively early stage and exploring opportunities presented by it and other related projects. We invested a lot of time to these discussions but consider that both the Trust's and our partners' proposals, including suggestions for biodiversity net gain and mitigation, have been largely ignored.

For example, our suggestion that excess spoil could be used for land restoration on Southern Water's land adjacent to St. Catherine's Hill seems to have been dismissed. However, current plans for spoil in the Mitigation Design Plan suggests that the optional zones for spoil are to be returned to agricultural management. We are concerned that this is not part of any ecological enhancement with in-perpetuity and long-term management security.

We remain committed to helping the Scheme realise shared objectives in a positive way. Together with key partner organisations, we feel that the process of stakeholder consultation for this high-profile project is falling short.

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust would be keen to recommence discussions with Highways England about the Scheme and the need to address key questions that remain unclear to us and our partners on these and other matters.

2. Historic severance of the landscape

The history of the M3 and Twyford down is an example of the kind of retrograde thinking that we can no longer afford to tolerate in a climate and nature emergency. When the scheme was first announced by the Department of Transport, there was justified widespread outrage over the destruction proposed. Twyford Down was one of the most protected habitats in Southern England, a rich site of ecological importance with 6 species of rare orchid and the threatened chalk hill blue butterfly. Yet the M3 construction destroyed two Sites of Scientific Special Interest (SSSI), two scheduled ancient monuments and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Our nature reserve at St Catherine's Hill was compromised, vital wildlife corridors were severed, and the local natural environment has been slowly put under increasing pressure by the development and industrial sprawl facilitated by this roadbuilding scheme. The damage has never been adequately addressed and the new proposals will only act as a catalyst to further development and compound pressures on an already greatly damaged landscape. We have no assurances that there will not be further expansions to the road network in another 25 years. The damage must stop.

We are deeply concerned that the new preferred route for the new Junction 9 will see yet more chipping away at the remaining chalk downland nature sites, but the significance of the problem extends beyond specific damage to a wider malaise in strategy.

It took just two years for the M3 to sever Winchester from the landscape, permanently hemming our reserve at Catherine's Hill against the city and splitting people and nature from the land beyond. In 2010, the South Downs National Park, on the other side of the M3 chasm became a designated National Park for the nation, yet the people and nature in Winchester remain cut-off from the green spaces that we rely on for our health and wellbeing.

Rather than continue to cut away at the isolated fragments of habitat, widening the wounds of the past, we must have the ambition to correct policy errors of the past and reconnect the landscape.

3. The need to reconnect the landscape and restore a Nature Recovery Network

This scheme does not match the ambition or priorities of central government, particularly in the upcoming Environment Bill that seeks to, 'embed environmental principles in future policy making and takes the essential steps needed to strengthen environmental oversight and improve on the way things have been done in the past.'

As part of these policy ambitions, the government has committed to a 'Nature Recovery Network'. This Network will be a joined-up system of places important for wild plants and animals, on land and at sea. Allowing plants, animals, seeds, nutrients, and water to move from place to place and enabling the natural world to adapt to change. It will create the corridors and areas of habitat they need to move in. It can only do this effectively if, like our road network, it is treated as a joined-up whole. It would be unthinkable for the M3 to be cut off at Winchester and likewise, the policy direction of government considers it unthinkable for habitats, like those at our protected reserves around Winchester, to remain fragmented from the wider landscape.

We are deeply concerned therefore that this M3 Junction 9 proposal is predicated on outdated logic, widening the wounds of the past. We must have the ambition to correct policy errors and reconnect the landscape. We urge instead a new approach, building on policy momentum to create a 'Green Bridge' spanning the damaged chasm at Twyford Down and creating a green artery for people and nature in Winchester.

A Green Bridge would relieve the intense recreational and development pressures on protected reserves at St Catherine's Hill and Winnall Moors and give nature the flexibility to move and adapt. It would reconnect the City of Winchester to the wider landscape and stand as a statement of intent for future policy; road building and development cannot come at the expense of our fragile natural world.

4. Impacts to Winnall Moors Nature Reserve

We own and manage Winnall Moors Nature Reserve which is a designated nature reserve of national (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and European (Special Area of Conservation) importance.

Overall, we are gravely concerned that the M3 Junction 9 proposals, including to potentially compulsory purchase land in the North-East strip of our reserve, will lead to the erosion of the wildlife on our site and in the surrounding area, and will severely impact our ability to manage the reserve.

With regards to the direct impact to wildlife on our reserve, we consider that the proposals present five key issues, all of which impact the integrity and functioning of Winnall Moors nature reserve:

1. Cutting the connectivity between the reserve and our meadow adjacent to the A34
2. Impact the management of the reserve, including drainage
3. Exacerbating existing pressures on the reserve

4.1 Cutting the connectivity between the reserve and our meadow adjacent to the A34

The current proposals to compulsory purchase the North-East strip of Winnall Moors nature reserve (as detailed in Highways England's Individual Land Management Plan sent to the Trust on 25th May 2021) would sever the connectivity between the main reserve and our meadow adjacent to the A34. This would hinder the ability of the local ecological network to function sufficiently to allow the movement of wildlife between the main part of the reserve and our meadow, as well as impact the Trust's ability to manage the reserve for the benefit of wildlife (see 1.2 below).

The SSSI meadow adjacent to the A34 is in unfavourable recovering condition. The 2.5ha area has been in active management for the past twelve years, reducing scrubby cover and using conservation grazing to restore the rare grassland habitats. The 2018 HBIC survey, states 72 species were recorded, including 7 county notables. The National Vegetation Classification (NVC)

communities include, S28, tall herb fen, S6 swamp, M22 Fen Meadow, S4 swamp and reed beds and S23, other water margin vegetation. It is the carefully managed mosaic of habitats that makes the site home to the following notable species: reed warbler, Cetti's warbler, reed bunting, water vole, otter, ragged-robin, marsh valerian and common valerian.

We consider that the current proposals could significantly impact the wildlife and habitats found on our reserve as well as the wider ecological network, considering that Winnall Moors SSSI, is a core wildlife-rich site that is fundamental to the functioning of the wider nature recovery network.

4.2 Impact the management of the nature reserve and drainage

We consider that the current proposals to compulsory purchase the North-East strip of Winnall Moors nature reserve could seriously impact our ability to manage the reserve for the benefit of nature.

Highways England's current plans would cut the connectivity between two parts of our reserve (as detailed above), preventing us from moving livestock between the fields. Livestock are crucial to the management of the reserve for the benefit of nature. Disruption to the management of the livestock could prevent the Trust from being able to manage the reserve to ensure maximum benefit for wildlife.

We also consider that the proposed plans would adversely impact the infrastructure on site, including the bridge we use for access and water level management control systems in the north-eastern corner of the reserve which is critical for managing the sites hydrology and maintaining the carefully managed habitats. The current plans also appear to encompass an important drainage pathway into Winnall Moors nature reserve. Although, without further information from Highways England, we are unable to identify exactly how our reserve will be impacted.

Currently we maintain critical access to the meadow adjacent to the A34 via two bridges, one in the northeast corner, used year-round, and a bridge to the south, used after haymaking (Aug – Dec). We are concerned that the current scheme could impact these bridges and thus our ability to manage the reserve.

We are not satisfied that Highways England have properly considered the impact of their plans on the drainage along the Northern boundary with Winnall Moors, nor have they considered the wider potential impacts of their proposed scheme on our reserve.

4.3 Exacerbating existing pressures on the nature reserve

Our reserve at Winnall Moors is increasingly being subject to pressures from development, including this current scheme. Winnall Moors is the 'crown jewel' for wildlife locally and forms an integral part of the River Itchen SAC and SSSI and is central to the functioning of the local nature recovery network. The increasing development pressures demonstrates the overall lack of care and concern for our few remaining wildlife refuges locally. In a climate and nature emergency, we cannot keep squeezing wildlife into smaller and smaller spaces, it needs space to recover. We expect Highways England to demonstrate their concern for the nature reserve and its wildlife by ensuring it suffers no damage.

Conclusion

We are living through a climate and nature emergency and can no longer tolerate further habitat destruction and missed opportunities for nature's recovery. Highways England must deal with the legacy of damage from previous schemes and ensure that there is real and tangible net gain for nature. Nothing short of consistent investment in nature and decarbonisation is now acceptable across all Highways England projects. We call on you to rethink these plans so that instead they represent a nature-positive approach, paving the way for forward-thinking developments and enabling nature's recovery.

Any proposed scheme must include:

- No net damage to the wildlife of our nature reserve at Winnall Moors and significant biodiversity net gain overall.
- Large scale habitat creation. Significant new areas of chalk downland could be restored, utilising chalk excavated during construction.
- Restoration of woodland, trees and hedgerows in surrounding areas, helping to improve air quality.
- A green bridge across the motorway, re-uniting the severed down of St Catherine's Hill and the 'dongas' and establishing a proper gateway to the South Downs National Park.
- A commitment to investing in sustainable transport for the future, improving public transport.

We expect Highways England to address the issues raised in this letter, and I would like to reiterate that the Trust wants to continue to work with you to enable these issues to be addressed prior to a Development Consent Order application being submitted in early 2022.

We await your response with keen interest, and if you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,



Debbie Tann
Chief Executive
On behalf of Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust